

Sūrah 109

Al-Kāfirūn

(The Unbelievers)

(Makkan Period)

Title

The word *al-Kāfirūn* (the unbelievers) occurring in the opening verse constitutes this *Sūrah*'s title.

Period of Revelation

According to Ibn Mas'ūd, Ḥasan Baṣrī and 'Ikrimah it is a Makkan *Sūrah* while 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr regards it as Madīnan. Divergent reports exist regarding 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās's and Qatādah's view about this *Sūrah* being Makkan or Madīnan. The majority view, nonetheless, is that it is Makkan. Its contents also bear out its Makkan bearings.

Circumstantial Setting

There was a phase in Makkah when the polytheistic Quraysh had voiced their opposition to the Prophet's call yet the Quraysh chiefs were confident of striking a deal with the Prophet (peace be upon him). They presented many proposals to him that they

considered might end the conflict between him and them. Several *Aḥādīth* provide details of all this.

‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās reports: “The Quraysh chiefs proposed to the Prophet (peace be upon him): “We are prepared to give you so many riches as will make you the wealthiest person in Makkah. We will arrange your marriage with a woman of your choice. Our only condition is that you refrain from reviling our idols. Then we will follow you. If you do not accept any of these, here is another proposal which is in our mutual interest.” When the Prophet (peace be upon him) asked them to elaborate, they said: “For one year you worship our lords, Lāt and al-‘Uzzā and for the next year we will worship your Lord.” The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked them to wait for his Lord’s directive.¹ Upon this, *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn* and Verse 64 of *al-Zumar* were revealed, (Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Ṭabarānī). Another report by Ibn ‘Abbās reads as follows: “Some of the Quraysh sought a deal with the Prophet (peace be upon him) whereby if he kissed their idols, they would worship his Lord. Upon this *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn* was sent down,” (‘Abd ibn Ḥumayd).

Sa’īd ibn Mīnā’, the freed slave of Abū al-Bakhtarī, relates: “Walīd ibn Mughīrah, ‘Āṣ ibn Wā’il, Aswad ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and Umayyah ibn Khalaf called on the Prophet (peace be upon him) and told him: ‘Let us worship your Lord and you should worship our lords. We will make you a partner in all of our affairs. If you come up with something better than what we have, we will join you and get our share. If we have got something better than what you have brought, you will be our partner in this and get your share.’ In response to this, Allah sent down this *Sūrah*.” (Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Ḥātim. Ibn Hishām has also narrated this story in his *Sīrah*.)

Wahb ibn Munabbih reports that the Quraysh had proposed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) that he should enter their fold

1. This does not mean in any way that the Prophet (peace be upon him) considered their offer worthy of consideration or that, God forbid, he expected, in any degree, Allah’s approval of their proposal. Like an officer, he merely agreed to forward their totally unreasonable suggestion to the higher authority. So doing, he intended to provide them with Allah’s final and binding ruling on the matter.

for a year and that they would reciprocate the following year by embracing his faith, ('Abd ibn Ḥumayd and Ibn Abī Ḥātim). One thus learns that on several occasions the unbelieving Quraysh made these proposals and a decisive, categorical response was called for, resolving the issue once and for all. They were to be told firmly about the Prophet's stand on compromise in matters of faith.

Subject Matter and Themes

Against this background, it is clear that this *Sūrah* was not sent down in order to preach tolerance in matters of faith, as is misconstrued by some today. Rather, it was sent down in order to declare Allah's categorical disavowal of the unbelievers' rituals, worship and idols. They were unambiguously told that Islam and unbelief are two distinct and opposite polarities and, hence, no adjustment is possible. Initially, this was stated while addressing the unbelieving Quraysh and as a response to their proposal. However, being part of the Qur'ān, this message is for all Muslims for all times: they must disavow unbelief both in word and deed. They must clearly state that flexibility is untenable on the issue of faith. The *Sūrah's* message was valid at the time of its revelation and, after the death of its immediate addressees, it was followed by those Muslims who were initially unbelievers. Centuries later, Muslims still recite the same as disavowal of unbelief is an essential part of the Islamic faith.

The following *Aḥādīth* bring into light the importance of this *Sūrah* in the Prophet's eyes: 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar reports: "Many times did I see the Prophet (peace be upon him) reciting *Sūrahs al-Kāfirūn* and *al-Ikhlāṣ* in the two *rak'ah* Prayers before *Fajr* and after *Maghrib* Prayers." Reports of similar import with minor changes in the wording are cited by Imām Aḥmad, Tirmidhī, Nasā'ī, Ibn Mājah, Ibn Ḥibbān and Ibn Marduwayh on the authority of Ibn 'Umar. Khabbāb reports: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) advised me to recite *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn* on retiring to bed. It was his practice to do so," (Bazzār, Ṭabarānī and Ibn Marduwayh). Ibn 'Abbās reports the Prophet (peace be upon him) as saying: "O people, should I tell you the formula to protect you against polytheism? This consists in reciting *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn*," (Abū Ya'lā

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and Ṭabarānī). Anas reports that the Prophet (peace be upon him) advised Mu'ādh ibn Jabal to recite *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn* before going to bed in that it marks the disavowal of polytheism, (Bayhaqī). Both Farwah ibn Nawfal and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Nawfal report that their father, Nawfal ibn Mu'āwiyah al-Ashja'ī, requested the Prophet (peace be upon him) to instruct him in reciting something before going to bed. He directed him to recite *Sūrah al-Kāfirūn*, for it represents one's disavowal of polytheism, (Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, Tirmidhī, Nasā'ī, Ibn Abī Shaybah, Ḥākim, Ibn Marduwayh and Bayhaqī). A similar request was made by the brother of Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, Jabalah ibn Ḥārithah, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) gave him the same advice, (Aḥmad, *Musnad*, Vol. II, p. 456, and Ṭabarānī).